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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that violent behavior is a complex phenomenon that is manifested in many different ways, the focus of this paper is to inform the development and implementation of school-based violence prevention strategies. The Second Step Program of the Jefferson County Public Schools is highlighted as an example of a successful violence prevention program for kindergarten through middle school aged children. Second Step is designed to prevent aggressive behavior by increasing prosocial behavior, reflected by competence in peer interactions and in interpersonal conflict resolution skills. Based on the habits of thought model that violence can be unlearned, Second Step includes activities to help students acquire empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management skills. An evaluation of the program revealed that the Second Step curriculum provides positive effects on the central measures of empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. (Contains 39 references and 3 tables.) (GCP)

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RUNNING HEAD: EARLY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE

Early Prevention of Violence: The Impact of a School-Based Program in Social Skills and Conflict Resolution Learning

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Early Prevention of Violence: The Impact of a School-Based Program in Social Skills and Conflict Resolution Learning

Research studies have demonstrated that there is continuity in aggressive behavior over time: children who have aggressive behavior in the elementary school years are more likely to display antisocial and violent behaviors as adolescents and young adults (Farrington, 1991; Tremblay, Mccord, Boileau et al, 1992). In this regard, early intervention has been advocated as most appropriate to break this chain of events (Tremblay & Craig, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1994).

In defining school violence, we need to consider "violence" along a continuum of behavior within a developmental framework. For example, violent behavior for young elementary school children primarily consists of aggressive behaviors such as kicking, hitting, spitting, or name calling. As children grow older, behavior becomes more serious, characterized by bullying, extortion, and physical fighting. Aggressive or violent adolescents may engage in assault against other students and staff, sexual harassment, gang activity, or weapon carrying. The term *school crime* has also been used to define different types of criminal behavior at school, including theft, property offenses, and vandalism (Goldstein, Apter, & Hartoonunian, 1984). Others define school violence as conflict between students and teachers (Curcio & First, 1993), or as activities that cause suspensions and disciplinary contacts or detentions. Studies of school violence have variously used such terms as aggression, conflict, delinquency, conduct disorders, criminal behavior, antisocial behavior, and violence, among others, to describe this class of problem behaviors. Aggressive behavior is different from violence and antisocial behavior.

Risk Factors Associated with Violence

To understand risk for violence along a developmental continuum, and to provide a framework for school-based prevention and intervention efforts, it is essential to understand risk factors for aggression and violence. It is also essential to understand the *protective factors* that schools can foster or provide to reduce a child's risk of engaging in or being victimized by violence. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 1993) the preponderance of evidence suggests that violence is learned behavior. This does not mean that physiological or temperamental factors are unrelated to the manifestation of aggressive or violent behavior, but that, for most individuals, violence is learned behavior. This has tremendous implications for understanding risk factors and related attempts at prevention and intervention.

In a review of comprehensive strategies for dealing with adolescent problem behaviors, Wilson and Howell (1995) identified four broad categories of risk factors: (a) individual characteristics, (b) family and school influences, (c) peer group influences, and (d) neighborhood and community effects. They also outlined three broad categories of protective factors that may be instrumental in moderating an adolescent's exposure to risk for delinquency involvement: (a) individual characteristics (e.g., resilient temperament and prosocial attitudes); (b) close affective ties with family members, teachers, and friends; and (c) healthy beliefs as well as clear standards for behavior.

Recognizing violent behavior as a complex phenomenon that is manifested in many different ways, the focus here is to inform the development and implementation of school-based violence prevention strategies. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. The

six categories of risk are: temperament and perinatal risk, cognitive abilities and factors influencing school achievement, the stability and early onset of aggressive behavior, family factors, exposure to violence and victimization by violence, and the influence of media on aggressive and violent behavior. Several excellent reviews examine risk factors for aggression and violence (Earls, 1994; Elliott, 1994; Farrington, 1991; Fraser, 1996; Loeber, 1990; Reiss & Roth, 1993; Yoshikawa, 1994).

Limited Cognitive Abilities and Violent Behavior

Many studies have documented the importance of limited intelligence and school achievement as risk factors for child aggression and violence. For example, longitudinal research has demonstrated the relationship between low verbal intelligence, such as poor problem-solving skills and poor social skills (Moffitt, 1993), and risk for aggression and violence (Eron & Huesmann, 1993). This association held even after controlling for the influence of poverty, and was stable from age 8 to 30. In general, studies show that IQ scores for delinquent youth are about 8 points lower than the general population, regardless of the individual's race, family size, or economic status (Rowe, 1994). Recidivism rates, or the likelihood that a youngster will commit a crime again in the future, might also be related to IQ.

Low verbal IQ is also related to poor school achievement. Children who do not do well in school are more likely to be truant or to stop attending altogether (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989). Even in early adolescence lack of attachment to school is related to delinquent behavior (Vazsonyi & Flannery, 1997). When they are not attending school, these youth are usually hanging out with other kids who are also truant or who have dropped out of school. These deviant groups, made up of youth who have been actively

rejected by their peers, provide a setting where the opportunity for engaging in delinquent and violent behavior is significantly greater than it would be if a youngster were attached to school and attending it on a regular basis (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Patterson and his colleagues highlight the combination "failure" of peer group relations and academic skills which contributes to an "early starter" model of delinquency.

The Impact of the Critical Early Years on Aggressive Behavior

One of the most consistent findings in the risk factor literature is that it is possible to predict with a high degree of accuracy which children will be aggressive and violent in adolescence by their behavior in kindergarten and first grade (Farrington, 1991; Loeber & Hay, 1994). The more serious, and the greater the variety and frequency of early aggressive behavior, the greater the risk of antisocial and criminal behavior continuing into later adolescence and adulthood (Blumstein, 1995). Generally researchers agree that early conduct problems in kindergarten and first grade lead to poor school achievement in later grades which, in turn, leads to delinquency in adolescence (Hawkins, Van Cleve, & Catalano, 1991; Hawkins et al., 1992; Tremblay et al., 1992).

Other longitudinal work illustrates the tremendous stability of aggressive behavior (Eron & Huesmann, 1993). While not all children who are identified as aggressive in elementary school grow up to become delinquent adolescents and violent adults, the majority of delinquent adolescents and violent adults retrospectively would have been able to be identified early in childhood as having significant behavior problems (Tolan et al., 1995).

The phenomenon of early onset problem behavior and its stability and chronicity illustrate the importance of early prevention and intervention, especially given the

complex interplay of factors that become more difficult to ameliorate as children get older, such as ongoing school failure, peer rejection, persistent conflicts with teachers, and affiliation with other at-risk peers (Constantino, 1995). The window of opportunity for effective prevention and intervention diminishes as children mature.

The Impact of the Family on Aggressive Behavior

If violence is learned behavior (APA, 1993) then children can also be taught prosocial competence. Children are socialized from a very young age about how to handle frustration, how to react to limits and consequences, and how to solve problems effectively and resolve disputes. Most of this socialization first occurs at home and in the family. The evidence is clear: parents of aggressive children punish more frequently, but inconsistently and ineffectively. They also tend to negatively reinforce coercive and manipulative child behavior and fail to adequately reinforce positive, prosocial behavior. A coercive style of parent-child interaction can develop wherein parents reinforce coercive child behavior and are inadvertently negatively reinforced themselves--by giving in to their coercive child, they are rewarded when the child stops yelling or trying to manipulate them.

Children learn that aggressive behavior often leads to parents' giving them what they want. By reacting to a parental request with an aggressive response that is modeled on parental problem solving, the child escapes punishment, controls the social exchange, and continues desired behaviors (Patterson, 1992). One risk is that this learned style of interaction may generalize for the child from home to school, where it becomes part of a child's social repertoire with peers and teachers (Fraser, 1996). If a child learns from parents to respond to authority with aggression and manipulation, he or she will have

difficulty interacting successfully in a school environment where other adults and authority figures make daily requests of the child. Their interaction style becomes confrontational, oppositional, and potentially violent.

Parents who are harsh, rejecting, and neglecting also have children at higher risk for engaging in aggressive, violent behavior (Earls, 1994; Fraser, 1996; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993). Parental harshness has been found to increase the risk of delinquency, possibly by increasing child resentment and defiance, which is then expressed through truancy, poor school performance, and antisocial behavior.

Parents who monitor their children effectively and who are more actively involved in their children's school activities are more likely to have socially competent children. Parents who know where their children are, and who they are with, are more likely to have clear expectations and boundaries concerning their child's friends and activities, and to impose consequences when those expectations are violated or the boundaries exceeded.

Finally, children who are victims of maltreatment and abuse at home during childhood are at significantly higher risk for being violent in adolescence than their non-maltreated peers. In Thornberry's study (1994), 38 percent of youth from nonviolent families reported involvement in delinquency in adolescence. The rate increased to 60 percent for youth whose family engaged in one form of violence (partner violence, family climate of hostility, or child maltreatment) and to 78 percent for adolescents exposed to all three forms of violence. Exposure to multiple forms of family violence, therefore, doubled the risk of self-reported youth violence. Thornberry's results highlight the

significant influence of child exposure to violence and victimization by violence as risk factors for subsequent perpetration of violence. Exposure to violence and victimization by violence at home also contribute to child risk for perpetration of violence at school.

The Influence of the Media on Violence

It is estimated that by the time a child reaches the age of 18 he or she will have witnessed over 200,000 acts of television violence, including 33,000 murders (APA, 1993). Violent acts, defined as acts intended to injure or harm others, appear approximately 8 to 12 times an hour on prime time television and about 20 times an hour on children's programming (Sege & Dietz, 1994).

No doubt, children and adolescents are exposed to frequent and intense levels of violence on television, in the movies (e.g., *Terminator*), on MTV (particularly some forms of hardcore rap music), through video games (e.g., *Mortal Kombat*), every morning in the newspaper, and nightly on the evening news. Several recent large-scale studies have concluded that exposure to media violence is strongly associated with a child's risk for engaging in aggressive and sometimes violent behavior (APA, 1993; Derksen & Strasburger, 1996; Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1993

Surely not every child who watches lots of violence on TV grows up to be an aggressive teenager or adult, but those youth judged to be somewhat more aggressive at a very early age become significantly more aggressive after viewing violence in the media. Conversely, children who consume a large prosocial diet of programs like *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers* are less aggressive, more cooperative, and more willing to share with other children. Media, in all forms, but particularly television, exert a powerful influence on child aggressive and prosocial tendencies and behaviors. This has been shown in

laboratory studies, in field studies, in general reviews of many studies, and, in one Canadian community, before and after the introduction of television to an entire community (Derksen & Strasberger, 1996; Murray, 1997).

Research Site

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is the 26th largest school district in the United States. The school district serves more than 96,000 students from preschool to grade 12. JCPS has a vision for long-term student achievement. JCPS vision commits the school system to educate each student to the highest academic standards.

In October 1999, Project SHIELD (Supporting Healthy Individuals and Environments for Life Development) received nearly $3,000,000 from a consortium of federal agencies (Department of Education, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Center for Mental Health Services) as part of a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Federal Initiative. The award will provide three years of funding (nearly $9,000,000) to Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS).

Project SHIELD aims to provide students and schools with enhanced infrastructure and comprehensive prevention and early intervention, through education, mental health, and social services that promote healthy childhood development and prevent violence, alcohol and other drug abuse. These services target the development of social skills and emotional resilience necessary for youth to avoid violent behavior and drug use, along with establishing safe, disciplined, and drug free areas within school environments.

The Violence Prevention Program

Second Step is part of the Community Mental Health component of project SHIELD. Second Step is a research-based violence prevention program for K-middle school aged children. Second Step is designed to prevent aggressive behavior by increasing prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior reflects competence in peer interactions and friendships and in interpersonal conflict resolution skills. According to Grossman and colleagues (1997), the Second Step violence prevention curriculum appears to lead to a moderate observed decrease in physically aggressive behavior and an increase in neutral and prosocial behavior in school.

As part of project SHIELD, Seven Counties Services is implementing Second Step in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). The objective of Second Step is to increase children's ability to identify what others are feeling, take others' perspectives, and respond emphatically with others. The program has also the objective of decreasing impulsive, aggressive, and angry behavior. Second Step has 28 lessons each school year. The focuses of the lessons are on precursor behaviors that are incompatible with violence such as (a) empathy, (b) impulse control, (c) problem solving, and (d) anger management. Lessons are developmentally appropriate in content and delivery with ample opportunity for students to model, practice, and reinforce their pro-social behavior.

Second Step is designed to prevent aggressive behavior by increasing prosocial behavior, reflected by competence in peer interactions and in interpersonal conflict resolution skills. Based on the "habits of thought" model that violence can be unlearned, Second Step includes activities to help students acquire empathy, impulse control, problem-solving, and anger management skills.

A relatively recent comprehensive and well-designed evaluation of the Second Step program showed that 2 weeks after the 30-lesson curriculum, students in the intervention group were rated by behavioral observers to be less physically aggressive and to engage in more neutral/positive behaviors on the playground and in the lunchroom (but not in the classroom) than students in the control group. Some of the changes persisted at 6 months post-intervention, although neither teachers nor parents rated significant behavior change (Grossman et al, 1997).

Method

Participants

Twelve elementary schools in JCPS are currently participating in the Second Step Program. Table 1 shows the name of the schools participating in the program.

Table 1

Elementary Schools Participating in Second Steps (N = 12)

Name
Atkinson
Breckenridge-Franklin
Cochran
Crums Lane
Engelhard
Frayser
Hazelwood
Jacob
Roosevelt-Perry
Rutherford
Semple
Shelby

In the District, a total of 205 students took both the pre- and the posttest. All students were on first grade of the participating elementary schools, except for the participating students from Rutherford Elementary that were third graders. Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of these students. Given the high negative correlation between free/reduced lunch and single parent family structure with academic achievement, it can be concluded that these students were academically at-risk (Munoz & Dossett, 2001).

Table 2

Profile of Participating Students (N = 205)

Race	Gender	Lunch Status	Family Structure
59.5% Minority	54.1% Female	81.5% Free/Reduced	73.2% Single
40.5% White	45.9% Male	18.5% Pay	26.8% Dual

Instrumentation

In general, quantitative measures will be based on already established data collection mechanism of the county under examination. Data will come from the program director and from the Management Information System (MIS) of the county. Then, the evaluator will place the information into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) through the creation of a data file.

The Evaluation Interview for Second Step was used to measure the students in the primary program of the school district under study. The purpose of the Evaluation Interview is to assess the degree of knowledge and/or skills a student has before and after the intervention. Photos are placed one at a time on a table or desk with the student sitting opposite of the interviewer. The procedure is standardized and includes (a) consistency, (b) reading the questions as written, (c) pacing, (d) probes, and (e) recording answers. The instrument has established validity and reliability. Raw scores are recorded in the instrument. This measure was used as the outcome criteria for establishing success of the program at the school level.

Data Analysis & Procedures

As mentioned previously, for the quantitative dimension of this evaluation study, a descriptive and comparative design will be used. All data was entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 11.0.

Findings

Statistically significant differences were found in the pre- and posttest analysis at the district and at the school level. Table 3 shows the pre-test and posttest measures and their statistically significant t-value at each of the participating schools at the alpha level .001.

Table 3

Elementary Schools Participating in Second Step (N = 12)

Name	Mean Pretest Score (Standard Deviation)	Mean Posttest Score (Standard Deviation)	t-Ratio
Atkinson (n = 26)	23.81 (4.62)	28.38 (6.09)	3.55*
Cochran (n = 15)	22.47 (2.80)	34.67 (7.40)	6.90*
Crums Lane (n = 13)	25.54 (2.90)	34.46 (8.95)	3.24*
Engelhard (n = 24)	23.29 (3.77)	28.46 (7.22)	2.94*
Frayser (n = 13)	26.85 (3.33)	33.62 (5.33)	4.01*
Breckinridge-Franklin (n = 25)	26.96 (6.84)	27.60 (4.74)	.37
Hazelwood (n = 21)	24.33 (2.95)	24.71 (3.78)	.29
Jacob (n = 23)	23.61 (4.28)	27.30 (4.19)	2.61*
Roosevelt-Perry (n = 13)	24.23 (3.53)	30.46 (5.41)	4.36*
Rutherford (n = 20)	12.20 (3.08)	16.50 (2.21)	4.67*
Semple (n = 16)	23.56 (3.18)	34.19 (8.27)	4.38*
Shelby (n = 16)	22.81 (2.51)	23.13 (2.96)	.29
District (N = 205)	24.30 (4.27)	29.15 (6.85)	8.55*

Discussion

Second Step is a research-based, universal program. This early detection and prevention program for primary grades is being implemented by JCPS through Seven Counties. The Evaluation Interview was used as a pre- and posttest measure for the participating students in the treatment and control schools.

The Evaluation Interview is used to assess the degree of knowledge and/or skills a student has before and after the intervention The central measures were related to (a) empathy, (b) impulse control, (c) problem solving, and (d) anger management. These measures became outcome criteria for establishing success of the program at the district and at the school level. As a District, the gains on the pretest/posttest measure were statistically significant at the .001 alpha level. Statistically significant gains were also noted at most of the individual schools. The results of this study of Second Step, a widely used violence prevention curriculum, provide some encouraging evidence of a positive effect on the central measures.

Any approach to violence prevention in the schools needs to be a multi-component and multi-context intervention (Stephens, 1995). An effective approach includes parents, children, school staff, media, police officers, local businesses, and community-based organizations. Time limited approaches are not effective in the long run. Approaches that focus on only one risk factor (e.g., self-esteem) are also less effective. Research has shown that potentially the most effective programs go beyond a concentration on individual children and attempt to meaningfully change the climate or culture of the entire school. This is not to say that individual child-focused programs are ineffective and should be discontinued; they are a valuable violence prevention tool

(Tolan et al., 1995). They do not, however, address the contextual/environmental or structural characteristics of a school that contribute to the incidence of violence. Programs also typically need to last at least 2 years before they demonstrate a change in behavior that is sustainable over time (Yoshikawa, 1994). As discussed above, aggressive behavior is very stable and chronic, making it very difficult to change with short-term, curriculum limited interventions.

Adding violence prevention programs for long-term, systematic change, given other demands on schools, may be met with much resistance. In light of the many demands on them, teachers are often reluctant to embrace any activity that requires additional training, preparation time, or effort. How to address this resistance is an important issue. One strategy is to provide information about how violence prevention programs can actually reduce the time teachers spend on disciplinary problems, increasing their time for instructional activities. Another is to demonstrate how violence prevention efforts can reduce costs for vandalism or treatment of injuries related to fighting. Violence prevention programs may also increase attendance at school and decrease truancy, especially for children who stay home because they fear for their safety. If more at-risk children are actually in school, the school's ability to effect change for a child, and the chance that the violence prevention program will actually benefit the children most in need of the attention, are increased.

It is crucial to start anti-violence interventions early. If a child is identified as aggressive and at risk for academic failure at an early age, chances are that the child will continue to struggle over time, and the factors contributing

to adjustment problems will grow in number, intensity, and complexity. As children mature and grow older, there is a shrinking window of opportunity to intervene in an effective manner. The earlier the intervention, the greater the chances of success. The resources (measured in time, money, and effort) expended by waiting until a child is in adolescence, compared to the cost of intervening early in a child's life, are enormous. And the pool of resources available for anti-violence interventions is rapidly shrinking.

Interventions must be developmentally appropriate. A violence prevention program will be less effective and may actually exacerbate the problem if it fails to take into account the developmental appropriateness of program components to the target behaviors. Assume an extreme example: a violence prevention program for kindergartners that focuses on reducing gang involvement or firearm violence. Reduced gang involvement may be a laudable long-term goal, but impossible to demonstrate in the short term as an example of the outcome efficacy of a program for young children. A focus on knowledge and attitudes may be one aspect of the program's target goals, but funders are increasingly looking for behavior change as an indication of a program's impact.

Increasing social competence should be one program focus. To be effective, efforts must be aimed at increasing prosocial competence and protective factors (Kellam & Rebok, 1992; Werner, 1994), not just on reducing aggression, crime, and violence. It is easy and natural to pay attention to a child's negative behaviors. Assault, vandalism, bullying, and theft are all behaviors that contribute

to fear and insecurity. The need to prevent their occurrence in the schools is paramount to ensuring a safe environment that is conducive to learning.

There are, however, at least three difficulties with concentrating on eliminating negative behavior instead of fostering positive behavior. First, negative behaviors are very difficult to stop altogether, so some incidents will occur in most schools. Second, in most schools a relatively small portion of the students account for the a large number of the discipline problems and violent, criminal acts. Merely focusing on reducing these negative behaviors puts a lot of emphasis on a small group of youth, perhaps differentially reinforcing their negative behavior, and ignores the large majority of students who are doing well. Third, by failing to focus on improving social competence, programs will not help develop the skills necessary to sustain positive behavior change and to sustain a positive, safe environment that is more conducive to learning and socialization.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had several potential limitations. First, selection criteria for participation may have resulted in an atypical set of schools, classrooms, and students. Second, since only the curriculum as a whole was evaluated, it is not possible to determine which component of it were responsible for the effects. Finally, though the results are encouraging, the Second Step intervention may need to be accompanied by other interventions related to the students' family to further reduce aggressive behavior. It is essential to continue evaluating the anti-violence program's effectiveness (Webster,

1993). It is not sufficient to assert a program's effectiveness in another school, community, age group, or ethnic/culture milieu, because its benefits may not transfer.

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